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SUBJECT: CODEL LEVIN MEETING WITH VP ABD AL-MEHDI

Classified By: PolCouns Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On Sunday, March 16, CODEL Levin met with Vice-President Adel Abd al-Mehdi at the Hakim Compound in Baghdad. In a civil yet frank exchange, Senator Levin and Adel discussed a host of topics. Focusing initially on the political and security environment in Iraq, Senator Levin pressed Adel on the necessity of a strategic pause after the initial drawdown of U.S. forces, the ability of Iraqi forces to assume the duties of the departing American forces, and the GOI's position on integrating the Sunni Awakening groups into the security forces. Adel also attempted to explain why he vetoed the Provincial Law while assuring Levin that the matter would be resolved. Though Adel appeared calm throughout the meeting, he became somewhat flustered when Levin questioned why the GOI was not contributing more of its resources to reconstruction efforts, given the tremendous budget it had. Regarding Iraq's relations with its neighbors, Levin also expressed his displeasure about the warm reception given President Ahmadinejad during his recent visit to Baghdad. The two also talked about relations with other countries in the region, particularly the Arab states, and the need for these states to establish a diplomatic presence in Iraq. In addition to these issues, the principals discussed several others, including Adel's recent veto of the Provincial Powers Law, the need for a Hydrocarbons Law, the SFA/SOFA negotiations, and the status of the Chaldean community in Iraq. End Summary.

#### Security Gains

¶2. (C) After beginning the meeting with general pleasantries, Senator Levin posed a series of questions about the political and security situation in Iraq. Focusing on the surge, Levin asked Adel if a strategic pause after the initial drawdown of U.S. forces was really necessary, or could the U.S. continue withdrawing forces after the first five combat brigades had departed. Responding calmly, Adel said that it was extremely important for the U.S. and Iraq to prevent a power vacuum from emerging, which could occur if the American troop withdrawal was done in a hasty manner. In Adel's estimation, a power vacuum would not only be damaging to Iraq internally, but it would also have external repercussions, as an unstable Iraq would be extremely dangerous for the region. Noting that the security situation in Iraq was indeed better, which he attributed to the surge as well as the Awakening movements and the Jaysh al-Mahdi ceasefire, Adel added that now was the time for caution as the situation was still tenuous. Although AQI has been significantly weakened, the terrorists were still capable of conducting operations, particularly in Mosul and Nineweh province, one of their last bastions of power. Adel praised the tremendous strides that the Iraqi military has made, citing clashes between GOI forces and JAM elements last week in Kut, in which (he claimed) the GOI troops routed JAM forces.

¶3. (C) Following Adel's commentary on the improved

capabilities of the Iraqi forces, Senator Levin asked him point-blank if they were now ready to take over for the departing U.S. forces, and if so, why would a pause in the drawdown of forces be necessary. While praising the GOI forces, Adel maintained that they still were not capable of assuming the American forces' duties, noting that the U.S. troops played an important role as "regulators" between neighborhoods and communities. When asked why GOI forces could not take over this role, Adel attempted to dodge the question, finally responding that in contrast to the American forces, Iraqi forces are still not viewed as impartial. He added that this would change in time, and that the upcoming elections would give the people more confidence in their government and institutions.

14. (C) Adel also revealed that there were some concerns about integrating the Awakening movements into the GOI security forces, and then made a somewhat dubious claim that there were over 700,000 Sunnis involved with these groups. When Levin disputed his estimate, asking him if he meant 70,000, Adel insisted that it was 700,000, and that the GOI had legitimate concerns about these groups and other armed groups outside the government's control.

#### Legislative and Election Issues

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14. (C) Returning to Adel's comment about the upcoming elections and how they would give people more confidence in the GOI, Senator Levin asked him how certain he was that the Elections Law would be passed. Adel replied that he believed it would be passed within 90 days, adding that the law had already been sent to the cabinet for review. Levin asked Adel if his recent veto of the Provincial Powers Law wouldn't

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impede this process and delay the elections. Attempting to assuage Levin's doubts, Adel opined that the GOI would be able to resolve the issue and that elections would be held as planned in October. Returning to Adel's veto, Levin mentioned that he was puzzled how Adel could selectively veto one item in a bill containing two other items. Adel replied that his veto was consistent with Iraqi law, and again sought to reassure Levin that the issue would be resolved. Later in the meeting, one of Levin's aides asked directly why he had vetoed the Provincial Powers Law. Responding that there were constitutional and legal issues that led to his veto, Adel once again told his audience that it was not a big issue and that the government would work out a compromise. (Note: On March 19, VP Adel withdrew his veto following an agreement worked out with COR leaders. End Note.)

15. (C) Turning his attention to the upcoming provincial elections, Levin asked Adel if he favored open list elections. Adel said that he personally favored an open list, but that this matter was up to the Iraqi Electoral Commission (IHEC) to decide. Adel also explained that closed lists were used in the past at a time when candidates legitimately feared for their lives if they openly declared their candidacies.

#### Iran, Syria, and Iraq's Arab Neighbors

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16. (C) Switching to Iran and its influence in Iraq, Levin's questions appeared to put Adel on the defensive. Noting that he had met with General Petraeus earlier in the day and learned that the Iranians were still supplying EFPs and other weapons used by insurgents against American, GOI, and other Coalition Forces, Levin asked Adel if he could understand why many Americans were disturbed to see the GOI warmly welcome Iran's president to Iraq, given that Ahmadinejad's government was responsible for the deaths of many Americans. Reassuring Levin that this was a matter the GOI took very seriously, Adel explained that GOI officials frequently raise this issue with the Iranian government. He also revealed that Sayid Abd

al-Aziz al-Hakim had lectured Ahmadinejad on this very issue, stating that the Americans were Iraq's guests and that Iran's actions reflected poorly on the Iraqis as hosts. In addition, Adel said that Iraqi leaders have tried to temper Ahmadinejad, constantly urging him to tone down his anti-American rhetoric.

¶7. (C) Continuing on the subject of Iran, Levin asked Adel how Iraq would respond if Iran was successful in its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Acknowledging that the introduction of nuclear weapons to the region would be a dangerous development, Adel added that the issue should be addressed by the UN. In response to Levin's question about how the average Iraqi felt about Iran's attempts to acquire nuclear weapons, Adel dismissed the query, stating that the average Iraqi had much more immediate concerns. He also reminded Levin that Iraq desires friendly relations with all of its neighbors, including Iran. Highlighting the importance of improved relations between Iran and Iraq, Adel cited as examples the growing number of Iranian pilgrims visiting Iraq's holy sites, as well as the important commercial and economic ties between the two nations.

¶8. (C) Adel said Iraq's relations with Syria were improving. Syrian propaganda against the GOI, for example, was much tamer than it had been in the past. In Adel's opinion it was not just Syria that had changed its position but the region as a whole, and that Iraq was now enjoying better relations with the Arab world. Responding to this comment, Levin asked why the Arab diplomatic presence in Iraq remained lacking. Adel replied that Egypt and Kuwait were considering opening up in Baghdad, and said he was confident this would come to fruition soon.

#### Iraq's Budget Surplus

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9.(C) Senator Levin told Adel that a lot of Americans were growing extremely frustrated with the continued costs of the Iraq war, which he estimated at more than \$12 billion a month. This issue has been compounded by reports of Iraq's rapidly-increasing budget surplus, which he believed to be \$60 billion, as well as reports that Iraq could obtain over \$100 billion in oil revenues in 2007 and 2008. He mentioned that both he and Senator John Warner have asked the GAO to investigate what Iraq is doing with its oil revenues. Noticeably taken aback, Adel immediately denied the existence of a surplus, and countered that this money was all part of the budget. Continuing to push Adel on the issue, Levin asked when the Iraqis would begin using their own money to fund reconstruction activities. Adel once again denied that there was a budget surplus, but finally conceded that financial mismanagement was a problem the GOI was working to

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address. He also remarked that current U.S. reconstruction efforts were good, and although the Iraqi efforts could improve, they were better than in the past.

#### The Kurds and the Hydrocarbons Law

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¶10. (C) Regarding the oil sector, Levin said that he was troubled by the recent agreements that the Kurdish government had signed with American companies, particularly the one with Hunt Oil. Though Hunt Oil alleges that they did not receive proper guidance from the State Department, Levin said that State Department officials had assured him that they had and that their message was quite clear. Concurring with the State Department's position, Adel rebuked the Kurdish account, assuring Levin that the Kurds were quite aware of what was and was not acceptable under GOI law. He added that the GOI should devote more attention to this issue, and that the Hydrocarbons Law needed to be passed. In response to Levin's comment that he heard the law was stuck in committee, Adel assured him that the different parties

only needed to work out a few details, and that once this was done it would be sent to the Council of Representatives.

#### SFA/SOFA Negotiations

¶11. (C) Adel explained to Levin that the SFA/SOFA negotiations were extremely important to the GOI, and that the PM was leading the talks, with the assistance of numerous technical experts. He also mentioned Deputy Foreign Minister Hamoud's role in the negotiations, and informed Levin that the Political Council for National Security would also play a prominent role in the talks. Praising the Political Council, Adel told Levin that this institution was becoming much more involved in the issues of government.

#### The Chaldean Community

¶12. (C) An impromptu comment by one of Adel's aides about the large Iraqi-American population in Levin's home state of Michigan provided Levin the opportunity to question Adel about the GOI's role in protecting minority populations, particularly the Chaldean Christians. After informing Adel that Michigan had one of the largest Chaldean populations outside Iraq, he proceeded to question Adel about GOI efforts to protect this community. Noting that the recent kidnapping and subsequent death of the Mosul archbishop had upset many of his Chaldean constituents, he asked if the GOI would allow the Chaldeans to form their own security forces to protect themselves. Adel responded that this would be reviewed by the GOI if the Chaldeans asked. He also blamed AQI for the attacks on the Chaldean community, noting that though some JAM elements had conducted attacks in the past, this was no longer the case.

#### Conclusion

¶13. (C) Before concluding the meeting, Levin told Adel that many opponents of the war believe that though the surge has worked militarily, it has failed to bring reconciliation and political progress, a point that was bound to come up during the upcoming congressional hearings next month. Before giving Adel a chance to respond, Levin told Adel that National Security Advisor al-Rubaie had expressed a different view about the necessity of a strategic pause, claiming that al-Rubaie believed that troop reductions should continue unabated. Once again, Levin asked Adel if a strategic pause in force reduction was really necessary. Adel said that the U.S. must be pragmatic about this issue, and that sufficient time must be allotted to assess the situation. When Levin asked how long the pause should be, adding that the U.S. Secretary of Defense favored only a brief pause, Adel ended

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the meeting by saying he would have to give this matter further thought and that he would get back to Levin with an answer.

¶14. (U) Codel Levin did not have an opportunity to clear this cable before departing Baghdad.

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